

Finite agents, sublime feelings: response to Hanauer

Article (Accepted Version)

Deligiorgi, Katerina (2016) Finite agents, sublime feelings: response to Hanauer. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 74 (2). pp. 199-202. ISSN 0021-8529

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/58894/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Pre-proof draft author's pdf for the final version please see the
Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism website
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291540-6245>**

**Finite Agents, Sublime Feelings: Response to Hanauer
Katerina Deligiorgi**

Tom Hanauer's thoughtful discussion of my paper "The Pleasures of Contra-Purposiveness: Kant, the Sublime, and Being Human" (2014) puts pressure on two important issues concerning the affective phenomenology of the sublime. My aim in that paper was to present an analysis of the sublime that does not suffer from the problems identified by Jane Forsey in her "Is A Theory of the Sublime Possible?" (2007). I argued that Kant's notion of reflective judgment can help with this task, because it allows us to capture the experience of failure that characterises the sublime, without committing us to ontologically transcendent items. In a significant departure from Kant, however, my account does not require references to our moral vocation to explain the pleasure we take in the sublime; the pleasure comes from getting the right measure of our agency. For Hanauer, trouble for my analysis comes both from the discursive presentation of the sublime, its focus on judgement, and from the removal of referenes to our moral vocation.

1. We may call the first problem, the problem of too much thought. For many commentators what is exciting about the sublime is that we get some cognitive gain without the cumbersome intervention of the understanding. For others, however, intellectualist assumptions to do with the grounds of our moral superiority over-rationalise the Kantian sublime.¹ Hanauer argues that my morally unadorned version remains vulnerable to this latter criticism because it relies on the complex mechanism of reflective judgement. As a result, the experience is overthought and underfelt.

In response, I should start by clarifying that the emphasis on judgement in the original presentation was dialectically motivated, by the context of the problems the paper sought to address.² Still, the sublime is not just a judgement. It is also a feeling. Hanauer's concern with the phenomenology of the sublime raises an important question about this feeling and its

relation to the judgement. Explaining how I see this relation should also help with Hanauer's question, whether the position I defend is cognitivist.

'Feeling [*Gefühl*]' Kant says should be used to mean a 'subjective sensation' that refers to pleasure and displeasure (5:206). By contrast, an 'objective sensation' refers to items such as colours, e.g. the 'green' of the meadows. To say that green is an objective sensation is not to make colour an intrinsic property of the object, nor to challenge the idea that colour is a secondary quality (see B 45, A 30, Mrongovius 29:856). Rather, it is to grant colour reality in appearance (cf. A 169, B 211). Colour is characteristic of a way in which we perceive the world, namely by sight (see Mrongovius *ibid.*). The sensation is objective because colour perception allows us to establish reliable connections to our environment. Feelings, that is, pleasure (*Lust*) and displeasure (*Unlust*) differ from objective sensations because they tell us nothing about the 'constitution of the object' (5:207) or about the subject itself (5:206). Kant's rather emphatic denial of cognitive role to pleasure and displeasure is puzzling, because, if one feels pleasure, one at least knows that much about oneself, namely that they are feeling it. I think we should take this denial as stating, pretty uncontroversially, that, in contrast to objective sensations, there is no distinctive sense modality associated with the sensation of pleasure or displeasure and so no characteristic mode of perception through which we establish a reliable connection to the environment. This leaves the possibility of further specification of the feeling in conjunction, say, with a judgement, so that it can have a cognitive role.³

The sublime is a peculiar sort of feeling in that it combines pleasure with displeasure. Following Kant, in the original paper, I connected each valence respectively to purposiveness and contrapurposiveness in a unified judgement of the sublime. How should this relation between feeling and judgement be understood? In examining the alternatives below I will be staying close to Kant's presentation of the sublime, because I think it offers us the conceptual resources to formulate an interesting as well as plausible account of this relation.

1.1. One option is *accompaniment*, the judgement 'this is sublime' accompanies the feeling, in the sense that it is a verbal rendering of the feeling: we see the bold overhanging cliffs, we feel the peculiar pleasure that is the sublime and 'call these objects sublime' (5:261).

Accompaniment states that feeling comes first, the person experiencing the feeling then 'calls' it, "this is sublime", in the same way that a tickle can be followed by "this is ticklish", and so on. Kant's discussion of the dynamic sublime complicates matters somewhat. Kant claims that someone who is afraid cannot 'judge about the sublime in nature' (5:261). *Accompaniment* has at first no trouble with this: for the scared, the corresponding judgement is "this is scary", not "this is sublime". But this is not how Kant elaborates the point. He says that 'it is impossible to find satisfaction in a terror that is seriously intended' (5:262). This is not because fear overwhelms other feelings, but rather because an environmental condition for the arousal of the feeling of the sublime has not been met and a fear response is appropriate (5:262, 264). There is something wrong, Kant suggests, with a person who does not fear and seek to avoid a genuinely threatening object (5:261). So it looks as if the feeling of pleasure in the sublime is not possible without a prior estimate about whether the situation is genuinely threatening or not.

1.2. The second option, *precedence*, follows from the above: judging precedes feeling.⁴ This chimes with Kant's claim that 'the disposition of the mind to the feeling of the sublime requires its receptivity to ideas' (5:265). Among the relevant ideas one would have to include ideas about the object, the observer's situation with respect to the object, the observer's identity as agent, or following the moral direction of Kant's argument, moral ideas.

Precedence certainly falls foul of the too much thought problem. What counts in its favour is that it distinguishes clearly between the object that arouses the feeling and what the feeling is about. Such distinction is needed to make sense of Kant's insistence that objects in nature arouse 'this feeling in us' (5:264) yet the sublime is not 'contained in anything in nature' (5:264). For *precedence* the feeling is about whatever the judgement is about. The propositional content of the judgement -or judgements- involved allows us to establish criteria of application of the concept of the sublime and also to differentiate between feelings. So if some elements are missing, if for example, we judge we are in peril after all, then the feeling changes.

Aside from the risk of overintellectualising the experience of the sublime, another drawback is that according to precedence failure to be moved moved 'by that we judge to be sublime' (5:265) must be explained by missing out on some judgement. When Kant envisages two people side by side in front of the same object, he says of the one of the two is not moved that the

man has 'no feeling [*Gefühl*]' (5:265), not that has not put enough thought to it.

1.3. The final option, which I shall recommend, is *receptivity* from the earlier claim about receptivity (*Empfänglichkeit*) to ideas. Kant associates judgement and more generally thought with activity. What is it to be receptive to ideas in this context?⁵

A clue, I think, is to be found in the claim that the sublime 'pleases immediately' (5:267) and that it consists in a *relation* in which the representation of nature is judged in a certain way (ibid.). The portion about pleasure is no surprise, the sublime is a feeling after all. What is in need of interpretation is how this immediate feeling consists of a relation with cognitive content: something is represented in a certain way and judged to be so and so.⁶ I will gloss this as follows: feeling giving us access to this cognitive content. I will explain the feeling/ judgement relation using first a non-Kantian example, pain.⁷

The feeling of pain in my thumb, which pains immediately (i.e. I am not inferring the presence of the pain), can reasonably be described also as consisting in a relation insofar as it tells me that there is possibly something wrong with my thumb. Were I suffering from a pathological condition, such as congenital analgesia, something could be wrong with my thumb, but I would not be apprised of it through the feeling of pain. I take it that the man with no feeling, in Kant's example, is in a similar situation with the congenitally analgesic: he can't feel the sublime and so can't have access to the cognitive content of the judgement through the feeling.⁸ This path is closed off to him. By contrast, if the person who is moved by the sublime has access to some cognitive content. The feeling of the sublime tells us about the experiencing subject, though not their bodily or mental states, it is not about them as an individual at all, it tells us something the sort of being she is.

2. This brings us to the second problem. Let's call it the problem of lurking triviality. If, as I argue, we experience our agency as passive, as thwarted and finite, then, Hanauer responds, mere awareness of being able to pursue some end, however mundane, such as making a cup of coffee, cannot account for the sublime pleasure experienced at the encounter with a terrifying or immeasurable object. To feel such pleasure, we need some appropriately elevated ends.

This is how Hanauer presents the argument: First, we are more likely to experience pleasure, if we contemplate ends that *matter* to us. Second, the ends of reason matter, they are those we 'care most deeply about' (xx). Therefore, it is awareness of my ability to 'set, pursue, and actualize those ends' (xx) that most plausibly generates a sublimely pleasurable encounter with the object we judge as contra-purposive.

I think the second premise is questionable because there is a gap between the objective mattering of the ends of reason and the subjective experience of such mattering, a gap Kant uses to explain why morality appears to us in the form of a command. If we take this seriously, then it cannot be taken as a given that for any particular subject, who experiences a contrapurposeful object, the ends that in fact most matter to that subject are the ends of reason. What we can say with certainty with respect to any particular subject, from a Kantian perspective, is that the ends of reason ought to matter to them. If on the other hand, the sublime is a kind of moral illumination, suddenly making us aware of what matters to us, then the mattering claim would be in the conclusion not in the premise.

The argument can be reconstructed so that the second premise is: we experience pleasure confronted with the immeasurable and the terrifying. The conclusion then would be: So we must have become aware of ends that matter most to us, which, given sufficient thought, leads us to contemplate our moral vocation. This is plausibly Kantian, but it looks now as if pleasure is an occasion for thought, rather than pleasure being *in* the thought. More importantly, if the theory becomes dependent to contents of ends, or to sorts of ends, it will be a theory about the importance we attach to those contents or sorts of ends. I take it as a desideratum for a theory of the sublime that it remain, if at all possible, a theory about an aesthetic category. This can be done, I believe, while addressing the triviality worry by focusing on the mere form of agency.

I will explain how can this be done, while addressing the triviality worry, first in a roundabout way, relying again on the judgement of reflection. In an anti-empiricist, anti-sensationist move, Kant defines pleasure in general as a state of mind 'in which a representation is in agreement with itself' (20:231). The pleasure he associates with the judgements of reflection of the beautiful and of the sublime are those in which, he says, the representation is the ground for preserving the state itself. In the case of the beautiful, we

can understand this to mean that we are at one with ourselves and entirely absorbed in the experience. In the case of the sublime, the encounter with the immeasurable or the terrifying object gives us pleasure because, while jarring, it also allows us to latch onto a representation that is in agreement with itself and so affords us the experience of being at one with ourselves. The sublime is complex because the object of the experience challenges our abilities, we cannot overpower it or get the measure of it. At the same time, we do not have to overpower or get the measure of the object. No such tasks confront us. So the experience is not one of failure. The experience is fulfilling though no end is fulfilled, because it is the closest we come to a pure contemplation of our sort of agency: finite yet capable. 'Finite' stands for the limitations encountered in setting out to do things, so that it makes sense to speak of trying to do things. Finite yet capable gives us the 'can' modality of agency. In Kantian terms, the purposiveness (*Zweckmässigkeit*) of the judgement of the sublime concerns the form of the subject as someone who can set ends (*Zwecke*), including highest ends addressing rational beings, the ends of reason, but all such ends are tasks, that is, ends pursued in a world that is not rigged for their realisation.

The sublime affords us a practical release, in parallel to the cognitive release of the beautiful: we can't do anything when confronted by the immeasurable and the terrifying, but, because we don't need to either, we become receptive to our identity as active beings without any reference to any contents of ends or sorts of ends. We are at one with ourselves insofar as we recognise ourselves as finite subjects of the experience.

References

- Crowther, Paul. 2010. The Kantian Aesthetic: From Knowledge to the Avant-Garde. Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, D. 1976. "Hume's Cognitive Theory of Pride." Journal of Philosophy 73(19): 744-757.
- Hanauer, Tom. 2016. "Sublimity and the Ends of Reason: Questions for [REDACTED]" The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism XX:xxx-xxx.
- Forsey, Jane. 2007. "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 65: 381-389.
- Kant, I. 2001. Critique of the Power of Judgement. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge University Press.

- , 1999. Critique of Pure Reason. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge University Press.
- , 1999. "Metaphysics of Morals" in Practical Philosophy. Translated by Mary Gregor. Cambridge University Press.
- , 1997. "Metaphysik Mrongovius" in Lectures on Metaphysics. Translated by Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon. Cambridge University Press.
- Solomon, R.C. 1976. The Passions. Emotions and the Meaning of Life. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.
- Robinson, Jenefer M. 2010. "Bob Solomon and William James: A Rapprochement." Emotion Review 2(1):53-60.
- Rayman, Joshua. 2012. Kant on Sublimity and Morality. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹ Rayman 2012 is an example of the first, Crowther 2010, cited also in Hanauer 2016, of the second.

² It is similarly dialectical reasons that motivate my adoption of a naturalistic framework for the discussion of the sublime on which Hanauer remarks (see xxx).

³ I think this is especially plausible if we think not in terms of empirical psychology, which Kant associates with study of pain (*Schmerz*) and pleasure (*Lust*) (5:266), but with the sort of *a priori* investigation that concerns pleasure in the beautiful and the peculiar combination of pleasure with displeasure (*Unlust*) that is the sublime.

⁴ *Precedence* resembles twentieth century cognitivist views about emotions (not feelings). Characteristic are Solomon's statements that '[a]n emotion is a basic judgement about our Selves and our place in the world' (1976, 187) and that '[e]motions are judgements that have already been made' (1976, 192). Also from the same date Davidson's cognitive account of Hume on pride (1976).

⁵ The passage from §29, which contains the claim that a man who is not moved by the sublime has no feeling, reflects 18th century views about feeling and its cultivation. However Kant also says that 'refined feeling' is meaningless. This shows that he is not just repeating familiar motifs, he is incorporating elements of the contemporary discussion into an analysis of the power of judgement, and 'transpose[s] them into transcendental philosophy' as he says (5:266). The notion of receptivity allows a passive yet not pathological element in the discussion of judgement (see too 6:399f).

⁶ Kant almost says this when he describes the sublime as an object 'the representation of which determines the mind to think' a series of thoughts (5:268). I find Robinson 2010 very useful for thinking through these issues.

⁷ The example is non-Kantian only because Kant associates pain and pleasure with empirical psychology and so not with the level of analysis of the sublime he undertakes in the third *Critique*.

⁸ It is possible for the feeling not to occur, but it is *not* possible for the feeling to occur and to lack the relational content ascribed to it. By contrast, I may have a feeling of pain and there being nothing wrong with my thumb.